

The 146 Point Flame premiered at the Spreckels Theatre as part of the San Diego International Fringe Festival on July 3, 2014.

Cast:

TESSA..... Amanda Schaar
YETTA..... Adi Mullen
LENA..... Laura Bohlin
VINCENZA Lauren Preski
MALE ENSEMBLE Patrick Duffy

Production Staff:

Director Nick Kennedy
Costume Designer..... Valerie Henderson
Sound Designer..... Matt Warburton
Stage Manager Kristin Cline

The 146 Point Flame

CHARACTERS

TESSA
YETTA
LENA
VINCENZA

MALE ENSEMBLE: Plays the roles of FOREMAN, GARCELANCO, FATHER, FIREMAN, BROTHER, MYSTERIOUS MAN and ELEVATOR OPERATOR.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Even though there are five actors onstage, each actor has a story to tell. They are conscious of one another, but they have minimal interaction. They do listen to one another's stories throughout, sometimes reacting to the words by smiling, clapping, etc. The staging should suggest quickness in between character dialogue. This piece is not linear in form and should be taken as such by the artists involved. The element of time is critical to this piece.

The play is set in 1911. The actresses should wear simple dresses of the period, nothing fancy or colorful. The MALE ENSEMBLE may wear a suit. His change into different characters can be done using the skills of the actor. Very little costume change is needed.

CASTING

This piece is powerful with the minimum of five actors. That being said, several productions have added a chorus of women, aside from the four main female roles. The addition of up to eight actresses can contribute to the staging elements, as well as the overall production value, if needed. These additional actresses speak the lines of "ALL WOMEN" and where it states that all of the actors speak. The MALE ENSEMBLE role may also be delineated among up to seven actors, if necessary.

The 146 Point Flame

(Five black boxes litter the stage. The atmosphere is a mix of colored lighting and odd shapes. In the dark, we hear the crackling and snapping sounds of fire mixed with a light breeze. After a moment, with the lights still down, the sound changes to chaos, screaming and yelling and the clanging of fire wagon bells. Each cast member is frozen in a different position on their respective blocks. LENA and YETTA's blocks should be very close together. The lights slowly rise to a darkened and very moody feeling. The cast begins to breathe in and out in synchronization, slowly at first and then faster. There is a pin spot on each box that flashes in quick succession as the lights bounce back and forth between the cast as they breathe in different broken rhythms now. Music plays as the cast breathes faster and faster with the lights bumping up and down on them quicker and quicker. The chaotic sounds begin to play once again. Each breath is now panic. The sound of breathing now begins to echo. Their breathing gets more and more frantic as smoke fills the stage. Then the music, sounds and breathing abruptly stop, except for the wind, which will play throughout the piece.

Beat.

The ensemble gives one long, deep exhale. The lights rise a little on the factory. There should be very little in terms of scenic elements. Slowly, the actors become conscious of the sounds, then eventually of each other. The women begin to mime their work at various sewing machines. Their miming should resemble a choreographed dance.)

ALL WOMEN. Sew. Sew. Sew. Sew.
 FOREMAN. Sew, snap! Sew, snap!
 ALL WOMEN. Sew, snap! Sew, snap!
 FOREMAN. Cut, sew! Cut sew!
 ALL WOMEN. Cut sew! Cut sew!

(The smoke begins to clear as the lights rise to full.)

ALL WOMEN *(rising in volume and passion with each word)*.

Sew! Sew! Sew! Sew! Sew! Sew!

TESSA. Twenty-three.

VINCENZA. Washington Place.

YETTA. Greenwich Village.

TESSA. New York City.

ALL. 1911.

TESSA. America is melting—

LENA. Melting.

YETTA. Melting.

LENA. The sound of bells.

VINCENZA. Yes. The bells are ringing for us. I can hear them.

TESSA. For us all.

YETTA. In my mind's eye, I can see myself as a dove with elegant snowy wings, gliding, softly flapping through the ocean of clouds. The ringing of the bells draws my tiny body closer, closer to the edge of the sky. I am drawn to the rays of the sun glinting off of my crystal chariot.

TESSA. In my home of Warnemünde, we would cook sausages.

LENA. Air fills my lungs. Clean, fresh air.

TESSA. My father would fatten the casings, and he would throw the dead pieces of meat onto the metal rods, lifeless ... impaled.

VINCENZA. And the buildings stretch out into space. My fingers graze the tips of the hard cinders.

YETTA. Higher and higher we go as our bodies lift gracefully towards the open land. In the flash of a flame's second, I sense—

VINCENZA. The opportunities.

TESSA. The fire would ignite with a thunderous roar. My mother would laugh at the site of the stinking, smoldering flesh.

YETTA. The freedom.

LENA. Freedom.

TESSA. It meant that we had enough money to eat.

VINCENZA. Why?

TESSA. And I would watch the small pieces of animal flesh scorch underneath the flames.

VINCENZA. Why?

LENA. So young.

YETTA. I always ate so many pastilas that they called me little dough girl in Russian.

TESSA. As the drippings of the animal's lard plummeted toward the open flames through the meager metal rods, there was this sizzling sound and then a—

YETTA. *(stage whisper)* Pop.

VINCENZA. Pop. Pop.

LENA. Pop. Pop! POP! POP! POP! POP!

ALL WOMEN. POP! POP! POP! POP! POP! POP! POP! POP!

(Beat.)

TESSA. Pop.

LENA. The dress I am wearing is from Poland. Our wages are so low at the factory, we can't even afford to buy one of their

cheap garments. This tattered dress that I am wearing was my mother's. She gave it to me before we left. Before the trip. Before we left the old country.

YETTA. That was many years ago.

LENA. My sister was barely old enough to comprehend.

FOREMAN. Get to work!

ALL WOMEN. Work!

FOREMAN. Work, work, work, work!

ALL WOMEN. Work, work, work, work!

VINCENZA. From the outside this tall magnificent structure looked—

FOREMAN. Strong.

VINCENZA. When in reality it was—

LENA. Fragile.

TESSA. Like the shell of an egg.

YETTA. Mother was—

LENA. Weak. Was always trembling. Her mind was tough but her body was—

YETTA & LENA. Brittle.

YETTA. I can barely remember my mother. She did not smile often.

LENA. We came to America. And that made her very—

YETTA. Sad. There was joy inside, but at the same time ... Utter sadness.

LENA. My mother's eyes were sapphire ... deep oceans. I can see them piercing through water into the atmosphere, she sees me. Between the rusty clay of the setting sun, my mother's eyes glow outward across the skyscape.

YETTA. My father loved her very much. But my mother's eyes ...

LENA. My mother's eyes. Inside her saddened eyes there was a place of maternal comfort that I carry with me, with my sister. Within the rim of her iris is where I live now. VINCENZA. Last evening, I met a man ... Garcalanco.

(The FOREMAN transforms into GARCELANCO. They act out the scene VINCENZA describes.)

VINCENZA. He hailed from Sorrento. Six feet tall, chestnut colored hair, the most impressive amethyst eyes. How striking he is! Arm in arm we strolled, as we turned the corner around Thirteenth Street. My heart, for the first time in my life, felt the strange elation I had only known from literature. I began to pull ahead down the sidewalk, but Garcalanco held me back in a ... sensitive sort of manner. *(Smiles. Beat.)* We walked along the storefront until we stopped at one. We looked up. "Mazzarino's Italian Food." Beneath the red and green painted sign he confidently approached the large glass window and waved his hand. In an instant ... a flicker of light. I looked up at this gorgeous stranger whose arm I had clutched, as if to hold on forever. He smiled down at me. My face flushed but I managed to smile back. Then, Mr. Mazzarino opened the door and welcomed his only customers for the evening as we sat down at a table for two. He closed the front door. We were the only people in the restaurant that evening. During dinner, we laughed and smiled, and I stared into this man's beautiful face. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of Mr. Mazzarino smiling. He turned off the kitchen lights and walked right out the back. And just like that. We were alone—

GARCELANCO. Alone.

VINCENZA. Alone.

ALL WOMEN. Alone.

VINCENZA. Alone, in the restaurant, Garcalanco told me how Mr. Mazarino was his neighbor in Naples and he had known him since he was a young boy. He told me stories of his past. How he would help his uncle pull in kingfish at the docks in a giant net, and how he had learned to club these enormous fish on the head until they struggled no more. He watched the life go out in the animal. As a boy he was told this was merciful, but cried every night afterward by himself in bed. His heart was tender, trapped within the strength of his chest. *(Smiles.)* We shared stories of our past, our lives and dreams for the future. In fact, when I told Garcalanco that I wanted to be a designer in fashion ... he didn't laugh like so many others had. He looked into me and said in a calm voice ...

GARCELANCA. I know you will be wonderful.

VINCENZA. My entire existence culminated into one single night. *(Beat.)* That night. *(Stage whisper.)* Ohhh! How many lives would one give for the opportunity to explore this world on a night like that! *(Change in attitude.)* The lights in New York are so bright in the evening, one can barely make out the stars in the sky.

GARCELANCO. We have all the time now!

TESSA. Time.

ALL WOMEN. Time.

GARCELANCO. All the time that the planet can offer us. We are no longer looked down upon as immigrants. Filthy, gritty immigrants they call us. Why? Why are we so disgusting?

VINCENZA. Why are we so different?

GARCELANCO. But we are no different here. Here we are exactly the same. Breathing and living and dreaming among the heavens, just like the rest of the city.

(VINCENZA looks down.)

VINCENZA. I'm scared.

(GARCELANCO takes her chin.)

GARCELANCO. Don't look down. Never look down.

TESSA. It was hot. The heat was in my heart. The heat was in my—

VINCENZA. Head.

TESSA. The heat was in my—

GARCELANCO. Soul.

TESSA. The heat was ...

(VINCENZA and GARCELANCO go in to kiss but they stop, as if a barrier is now between them.)

LENA. Don't!

TESSA. Don't!

YETTA. Don't!

(GARCELNACO pulls away from VINCENZA and resumes the role of the FOREMAN.)

FOREMAN. Don't! Don't look down!

TESSA. Never look down. And so I looked out. Straight out into the future. Forward were my eyes. Forward were my hands.

VINCENZA & LENA. Sew, sew, sew.

TESSA. Forward was my future.

LENA & YETTA. Sew, sew, sew.

YETTA. As the wind snapped at my ruddy cheeks, high above the atmosphere, I could see a large man with beady eyes standing at a door. His eyes peered into the depths of my being.

ALL WOMEN. Alone.

VINCENZA. Alone, in the restaurant, Garcalanco told me how Mr. Mazarino was his neighbor in Naples and he had known him since he was a young boy. He told me stories of his past. How he would help his uncle pull in kingfish at the docks in a giant net, and how he had learned to club these enormous fish on the head until they struggled no more. He watched the life go out in the animal. As a boy he was told this was merciful, but cried every night afterward by himself in bed. His heart was tender, trapped within the strength of his chest. *(Smiles.)* We shared stories of our past, our lives and dreams for the future. In fact, when I told Garcalanco that I wanted to be a designer in fashion ... he didn't laugh like so many others had. He looked into me and said in a calm voice ...

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TESSA. Forward was my future.

LENA & YETTA. Sew, sew, sew.

YETTA. As the wind snapped at my ruddy cheeks, high above the atmosphere, I could see a large man with beady eyes standing at a door. His eyes peered into the depths of my being.

FOREMAN. What's in your bag, missy?

YETTA. Nothing.

FOREMAN. Empty the contents.

YETTA. No, I—

FOREMAN. Empty your bag, now!

YETTA (*"emptying" the bag*). They're only scraps.

FOREMAN. What is this?

YETTA (*desperate*). There are scraps of the fabric. We don't use them for the trousers or anything. We throw them away! They're scraps for the trash.

FOREMAN. Lock the doors!

ALL WOMEN. No!

FOREMAN. Lock them I say!

(The sound of several doors locking. All women react.)

VINCENZA. Let me out!

YETTA. I can't breathe! I cannot breathe!

FOREMAN (*grabbing YETTA by the arm*). Come with me.

TESSA. No.

FOREMAN. Now!

YETTA. No!

FOREMAN. You can tell your story to the owners.

TESSA. No!

FOREMAN. Let's go.

LENA. Let her go!

YETTA. Let me go!

FOREMAN. Come with me, urchin!

TESSA. No.

LENA. No!

TESSA. I am free!

(With an element of dance, YETTA frees herself from the FOREMAN. Music starts.)

YETTA. I am free.

LENA & VINCENZA. Free!

TESSA. Free!

FOREMAN. Sew! Sew!

ALL WOMEN. Sew! Sew!

FOREMAN. Sew! Sew!

ALL WOMEN. Sew! Sew!

FOREMAN. Faster!

ALL WOMEN. Faster!

FOREMAN. Sew! Sew! Sew!

ALL WOMEN. Sew! Sew! Sew!

ALL. Sew! Sew! Sew! Sew! Sew! Sew!

(YETTA collapses, exhausted. The music and choreography stop. The FOREMAN walks over to her.)

FOREMAN. Sew! *(Pause.)* Sew!

(He pulls her up off of the ground.)

FOREMAN *(cont'd)*. Sew!

LENA. No! Leave her alone.

FOREMAN. She doesn't sew.

VINCENZA. Let her go.

FOREMAN. If she doesn't sew, she will be let go.

VINCENZA. We are Americans.

FOREMAN. And what does that mean?

TESSA. It means we have endurance.

VINCENZA. Determination.

LENA. And strength.

FOREMAN. Perhaps. But for how long?

LENA. As long as we live.

FOREMAN. We'll see about that.

YETTA. Air! I need air!

(YETTA rushes past the FOREMAN and crosses upstage. She bangs on the imaginary door. We hear the sound of her pounding twice on the door. It is locked. She tries another door. It is locked too.)

YETTA *(cont'd)*. I want air!

FOREMAN. You'll sew until the ending bell.

TESSA. She needs to breathe. She needs a break! You lock us away like animals.

FOREMAN. You steal and lie. Who's the animal now?

(TESSA slowly crosses back upstage as YETTA returns to her pedestal.)

YETTA *(smiling)*. I am clear. I can pass. I collected myself, and I push against the door. *(Smile fades.)* It does not move. *(Becoming frantic.)* I push again, and again, with all my weight, but the door does not move. The door is—

ALL. Locked.

VINCENZA. Away in our own little world, we strolled through the crisp January air. His warm hand tickled my palm. His fingers crawled like loving little spiders, then he wrapped his hand in mine. I stood gazing at the darkened aurora. The enormous pumpkin-orange moon lazily seeped

into the corners of my cornea, reddening our faces as we basked in a different kind of glow. In one hand I held my heart, with the other, I reached out to touch the moon. My stomach began to churn and my entire body began to tremble. His palms were coarse and weathered. Before he goes to bed each night, he feverishly attempts to scrub the black, darkened ink from underneath his fingernails. He works in a printing factory on the Lower East Side, but no amount of washing can remove the oil and grease from under his fingers, the hard institute of American labor. Within his large dirty paws, my strained, tired hands sit like ... delicate rose petals. I shivered as rain began to lightly drizzle from the heavens. He swung his other arm behind my back and drew me close, in a warm embrace, as we stood face to face. I thought he was going to touch my lips with his, and as I leaned in to meet his breath he jerked my body away, and we began to dance. I let out a startled scream of joy. AHHHHH!

(VINCENZA smiles and the girls laugh. Eerie polka music is heard overlapping the wind. She is tentative to move at first. Then, as if her memory sparks her feet, she dances a polka by herself. She lets the music take over her body as she begins to sweetly laugh. After a few moves, GARCELANCO joins her. The other girls smile and watch them dance)

VINCENZA *(cont'd)*. And like those forgotten days of childhood summers in Innsbrook, the two of us danced ... and laughed. The cathartic tones and forgotten rhythms of the music enveloped my body, and the entire day at the factory was forgotten. We swung our young, precious, delicious bodies around and around in the middle of Times Square. There was no music, but we danced nonetheless.

Onlookers pointed and laughed at the crazy immigrants swinging around the horses and carriages and men carrying boxes. Against the flickering illumination of the street candles, our shadows bounced across the moonlight as we danced. *(Beat.)* How does this remarkable man, who knows nothing in the world about me, know that when I am dancing, the movement possesses my feet and feeds my soul full of mirth? How did he know this? We only met nine days ago, yet he has mysteriously entered my soul and found the key to my laughter. I let my body and spirit run—

LENA. Free.

YETTA. And loose.

VINCENZA. My mind is untethered, like a carousel as it spins. The sweet chords of the instruments rub my temples and the tunes sink deep within the pores of my skin. As I enter my front door, the smiles on our faces collapsed into straight lines.

(GARCELANCO smiles and bows as the dance ends. VINCENZA touches the curves of his face, remembering the moment. A moment between them. They kiss.)

VINCENZA *(cont'd)*. Soft and slow. I savor each precious moment. The taste of his lips is safe. The ecstasy of his breath, irresistible. The gleam in his eyes as we finally pulled ourselves away. This drop of time, I will always carry with me. *(Savors the moment in a still sadness.)* For I will never see him again.

(Beat. GARCELANCO returns to his block, leaving her staring at nothing.)

VINCENZA *(cont'd)*. And now ... now there is ...

TESSA. Nothing.

YETTA. Nothing.

VINCENZA. There is nothing.

(Slowly, VINCENZA returns to her block.)

LENA. My bones are melting, my skin is flaking as the searing heat licks my brain. The crimson dragon is tugging at my soul while the drops of blood perspire off my eyeballs. The shards of broken veins burst in my legs. The capillaries fuse with the frail chalky bones of my broken body.

(LENA and YETTA clutch each other.)

YETTA. I have never seen such height.

LENA. I can feel her heart hammer through her chest. We hold each other so tight that her bony ribs stab through my ashen, searing skin.

YETTA. Smoke begins to fill my lungs. I must leave. I must escape. I must traverse the fire escape. Hand in hand, we slip our charred bodies through the red bricks and shards of broken glass. I can hear the terror, the screams of people on the street below.

LENA. We are nine stories up—

YETTA. And afraid of heights.

LENA. As we begin to descend the window out onto the fire escape—

YETTA. I hear a voice. A primal howl. A girl screams from inside the building. She speaks Russian. The girl is shrieking, thrashing around like a savage beast. I can only see her backside. I hesitate, and then I move. In an instant I stop, as the body turns around, flames of fire are bathing her torso. Her flesh, the pyre. Her dress and hair were once tender, smooth. Her arms flail wildly. I can see bone. I don't

know this girl. I have never seen this person in our factory. Or maybe I have, but I can no longer recognize her as the hellfire envelops her face. I move towards her, but my sister pulls me back.

LENA. Come back!

YETTA. I break free and run towards the wild creature. Before I can take two steps, the wooden floorboards beneath my feet give way, and for an instant I feel all of my internal organs in my throat. My body falls! As my arms reach instinctively upwards, I can feel a pair of hands grab my wrists. It is—

LENA. I.

YETTA. My sister.

LENA. The person I am closest to in this world.

(YETTA and LENA's FATHER appears.)

YETTA & FATHER. Lena!

LENA & FATHER. Yetta!

LENA & YETTA. Yes, father?

(YETTA and LENA join their FATHER, standing on either side of him.)

FATHER. My daughters, we have given your life meaning. Be free. Live as you couldn't in our old world. This new land is wonderful. Its people are magnificent. *(Coughing.)* I must go now.

LENA & YETTA. No!

FATHER. It is the will of God. Now is the time. *(Coughing.)* The mighty lord has blessed you both with the wings of angels. And I cannot help but feel proud that I have helped you to fly. And you will live a long and wonderful life.

LENA & YETTA. Father!

FATHER. No tears. No sorrow. Only life. Live your life, my children! Make me so proud. I will see you again beneath the rainbow.

(LENA and YETTA both cross to hug him.)

FATHER *(cont'd)*. Farewell.

(He bows out of the way and the sisters end up hugging each other.)

LENA & YETTA. Father!

LENA. And now we are together. Finally together. I am with the person that I am closest to.

YETTA. The person I am closest to in this world.

LENA & YETTA. My sister.

YETTA. Glancing down through the cedar, cindered planks below my feet, I spot the tempest that is the raging fire. Through the searing heat, time freezes. Girls like us, barely women, are running, screaming, dying. I see the pictures in my mind, unclouded, like moving photographs.

LENA. I pull.

YETTA. My sister pulls my tiny body up close to hers. Unscathed. Safe.

LENA. We are safe. We race to the window where hundreds of bodies are wedging, crushing their way out of the ninth story. The building's frame is splitting. The structure is collapsing. The heat is melting the mortar between the red bricks.

(LENA and YETTA pantomime, putting their hands on the wall.)

LENA (*cont'd*). As I put my hand on the outer wall, it simply gives way, nine stories down to Greene Street. I look out over the abandoned confines, My long, auburn hair whips across my mouth. Sweat and smoke pollute my brain. Yetta is in my arms. Stiff, still, like a porcelain doll. Down below, I can make out a circle. A group of men hold a massive net. TESSA. A circular net.

VINCENZA. Like fishermen. They have come to take us home. TESSA. They can catch us like butterflies!

VINCENZA. The fishermen are strong. The muscles in their backs undulate and spasm from hauling massive fish in from the depths of blue. Day in and day out these men provide for their families. They look after the family. It is the way of things in Italy. It has always been that way.

LENA. Yes. I can see them. The men are wearing bumblebee-striped hats and heavy wool coats. Their strapping voices rise up through the ebony smoke and winding soot. Their resonance is garbled, but solid.

FIREMAN. Jump!

LENA. We must jump.

ALL WOMEN. Jump!

VINCENZA. Like creatures of the ocean who want to be caught.

TESSA. But the women are terrified, frightened.

FIREMAN. You must jump!

LENA. Our spirit is undeniable.

YETTA. Yes.

LENA. I am reminded of the Torah. Inside our temple is stained glass. Across the luminescent rainbow patterns, I see a woman. A mature woman. Her back is arched, she smiles with a rose in her teeth. I cannot see her face.

YETTA. I can see her. She is looking for Adonai.

LENA. She gently turns towards me, the woman looking back at me is—

YETTA. Gazing and staring—

LENA. Fixing on my face. It is me. My face. I am old.

YETTA. You will grow old, Lena. You will be the most beautiful babushka in the world.

VINCENZA. And now we are the fish waiting to be caught in the net below. A girl's body pushes me out over the edge. I didn't know who she was. I never got to look upon her face. And without another thought, another word, another human being to touch, I am diving straight toward the earth. Toward Greene Street.

FIREMAN. Greene Street. You must jump onto Greene Street!

TESSA. The mere word brings a smile to my face. Greene. Green! I am reminded of the summers in Hannover.

VINCENZA. The summers in Innsbrook.

YETTA. The summers in Slovakia.

(*TESSA's older BROTHER enters and sits down, picking grass.*)

TESSA (*smiling*). The luscious blades of towering grass. I would try to hide from my brother, as we would play childish games while my parents would try to find us. The succulent blades of towering grass. In a childish game we loved so much, I would hide from my brother and he would hide from me deep in the grass behind the weeds, silent and motionless until—

BROTHER. Here! Below this tree! Come on!

(*They laugh and play as they run for the tree and hide.*)

TESSA. A spider.

(BROTHER captures the imaginary spider in his hands.)

BROTHER. I have it.

TESSA. It bites.

BROTHER. So do I.

TESSA *(laughing)*. It will bite you!

(He releases the spider.)

BROTHER. It's just as much afraid of you as you are of it.

TESSA. I feel when I am here. Nothing else matters. The fighting, the pain. Promise me when you get married one day that you would will be good to her.

BROTHER. Who?

TESSA. The one you will love. *(Beat.)* Never strike her. Never hurt her. Promise me.

BROTHER. I promise.

TESSA. Protect me from the world.

BROTHER. I'm your brother. I will always protect you.

TESSA. Even against ... him?

(Beat.)

BROTHER. When I am big and strong enough ... yes.

(She hugs him.)

TESSA. He hurts me. Father hurts me in ways—

BROTHER. I know. But I promise you, when I am strong enough ... he will never hurt you again.

(They hug. The MALE ENSEMBLE then goes back to his block, leaving TESSA alone. She looks out upon the green field.)

TESSA. They never knew where we went ... To escape the pain. We would escape into the green. The beautiful, rich fields of emerald, jade and malachite. It seems so simple, but he never came after us, after me ... while we were here, among nature. It was only in the confines of the house, the confines of that building that held my soul captive.

LENA. As the wall disintegrates, I gaze across Manhattan's skyline. *(Pause.)* The black, braiding smoke has cleared for a moment allowing, finally, the snowy clouds to almost reach out and caress my hand, alluring me, inviting me. With my sister's head buried in my chest, we jump. And for an instant ... *(Smiling.)* We are flying. We have wings. And we can fly, our wings will take us. In a fraction of a second, our world has become a microcosm. My entire life fits on the head of a pin.

VINCENZA. So many pins.

LENA. Our lives are threaded to this moment, to this place. The pattern of our lives is now exposed.

YETTA. As I peer through the crumbling edifice, I can now hear the cacophony of languages sifting through the haze of confusion. For the sixteen years I have lived in the United States, I have not spoken a word of Russian. I speak in English, I read in English. In Russian, the words are harsh and bitter. In this new world the words flow and fly. For English is now my tongue. This is how I will remember. My father instructed us.

FATHER. Gather around now. Gather around, girls. Come, come.

YETTA. Mother had passed before the journey, but my father held such a warm heart and, against all odds, brought us to this land of new.

FATHER. You will be in America soon. You will speak only English.

YETTA (*in Russian*). But Father—

FATHER. No. In English. Do you understand?

YETTA. He taught us the words—

FATHER. Work.

YETTA & LENA. Work.

FATHER. Play!

YETTA & LENA. Play!

FATHER. Joy!

YETTA & LENA. Joy!

FATHER. Heart.

YETTA & LENA. Heart.

FATHER. Compassion.

YETTA & LENA. Compassion.

FATHER. Truth.

YETTA & LENA. Truth.

FATHER. And family.

YETTA & LENA. Family.

(*The girls embrace their FATHER.*)

FATHER. You are my family. What has been left behind is only a memory. Live now, my children. Live now. Work hard. Enjoy your life. Look forward and never back. I will soon pass and, Lena, you will soon become the head of family. Do you understand?

LENA. Father. I am frightened.

FATHER. Lena, you have a firmness, vitality. You will one day find that strength in great measure and lead this family.

LENA. Yes, father.

FATHER (*smiling*). Never forget. Never look back. And never—

YETTA, LENA & FATHER. Look down.

FATHER. Never ...

YETTA & LENA. Look down.

LENA. In the curving sounds and puckered vowels that roll down my lips, I know that I have one person to thank for this gift. My sister. (*Looks at YETTA.*) My sister taught me to speak English in this country. (*Beat.*) And as I stand on the fire escape, I look into my sister's eyes, there is but one word for love and I cannot express my feelings through words anyhow. My heartfelt realization is so much that she is—all I have in this world. And all that I will carry into the next one.

TESSA. It didn't hold.

YETTA. It didn't hold.

LENA. Under the mounting pressure of bodies, the fire escape ... did not hold.

TESSA. The elevator shaft, molten metal. I am drifting downward.

FOREMAN. We all are downward now. Compassion knows not the bounds of economics.

VINCENZA. The chaos in my mind constricts my throat.

LENA. I feel the smoke as it fills my lungs.

VINCENZA. I feel nothing.

LENA. I see nothing.

YETTA. We are nothing.

TESSA. And we drift.

LENA. As I gaze out across the clouds, I spot an aluminous painted mural of gold and green lines snake across the body of ... of ... a little bug. It's a butterfly! Its wings seem to

pulsate at a different pace than real time. She flies with great difficulty for one of her wings is defectively larger. She struggles to maintain her flight, to maintain her dignity, even in the face of certain doom. The oversized, deformed wing flutters harder to compensate for the fallacy of her birth. A lesser creature in a world that orders the survival of the fittest. Her body writhes and turns with the blowing wind, nine stories above the Earth. Never has this butterfly flown so high and so far. She is now alone in the world. But still, the little creature, full of spirit and beauty, maintains her dignity. She is determined that her deformity, her difference, will never affect her flight.

TESSA. I can see the faces of my past.

VINCENZA. My relatives.

YETTA. My friends.

TESSA. I can see the images as if caught in a photograph. Near the bottom of the elevator shaft, a sea of flames has engulfed the tangled, aching, mourning bodies. I am falling, falling, down into a maelstrom of blood and tears. The golden flames are like a creature's tongue as it licks my feet and quickly sucks me into its mouth. Now enveloped, I broil within the confines of my own skin.

YETTA. As children, my sister and I imagined how we could dance on the evening clouds that settled low over the horizon. My sister and I would laugh until the last of the sunlight was gone, and the hungry moon would make its entrance. We would laugh and ...

YETTA & LENA. Laugh ...

LENA. And laugh. My sister and I would stare off into the golden orb that was the moon and dream of the sweet taste of chocolate. And I would stand beside her ears and make up tales of lands of opportunity.

YETTA. It's there, my sister! Look! Look! The little butterfly! I see it! Its contour seems to transform while it morphs into a liquid beast. I can see it!

LENA. And so my sister will fly.

VINCENZA. As my sinews snap and the layers of my flesh and muscle melt into themselves, I could only ask one question. ALL. Why?

TESSA. Was this the worth of my life?

(TESSA steps off her platform and dances to the dark music.)

TESSA *(cont'd)*. I had always wanted to be a ballerina.

MYSTERIOUS MAN. You can be whatever you like here.

TESSA. A dancer?

MYSTERIOUS MAN. Yes!

TESSA. A chocolate maker?

MYSTERIOUS MAN. Yes.

TESSA. A daughter?

MYSTERIOUS MAN. Yes.

TESSA. A mother ... one day?

(Pause.)

MYSTERIOUS MAN. You will be anything that you want to be.

TESSA. When can I choose what I want to be?

MYSTERIOUS MAN. Very soon. Very, very soon.

TESSA. I'm looking ... But ... I'm scared.

MYSTERIOUS MAN. It's OK. I'm with you now.

TESSA *(becoming frightened)*. I'm ... I'm ...

MYSTERIOUS MAN. It's OK.

VINCENZA (*crossing to TESSA and holding her*). It's OK. TESSA. I'm so very scared.

VINCENZA. I know. We all are.

YETTA. Swaths of beautifully rich fabric now lay scattered at my feet. Fluid material squeezes up through the holes between my toes. (*Beat.*) Oh, that blazing summer day my sister and I went to Brighten Beach. The warm sand curled between my toes. The sun beat down upon my sluggish, worn body from the week's work. I closed my eyes, protecting them from the harsh beams of light. I can still feel the tiny pebbles of the sand massage my exposed skin. It sends pleasurable tingles up my spine and chills my head. With all my strength, my fingers now plunge into the rich felt. I attempt to grasp the material but it simply slips through my fingers. I try to grasp with all my strength, but I can't seem to grab hold. My fingernails are tearing. Blood is pooling under my nails and streaming down my hands.

The fabric of my existence is tearing apart!

TESSA (*in a stage whisper*). Tear the flesh—

YETTA. Along with the metal fire escape, my body careens down through the black cavern, toward the cornucopia of colored terrain. An overflowing profusion of images snare my eyes as the gnarled metal sled courses through my veins. The wrested piece of iron punctures my skin, enters my arms, my torso and finally rests unapologetically above my abdomen. Still conscious, the bloody, burning bodies of broken flesh rain down around me like the leaves of the copper beech tree. The bodies seem to cascade as they slowly rock back and forth, back and forth, before they hit the ground with a soft thud. It's raining. It's raining hot blood; hot, delicate, purple blood. My blood.

(*The blocking has culminated into the staging of a triangle. TESSA is one point. VINCENZA and MALE ENSEMBLE are another point and the two sisters, LENA and YETTA, form the final point.*)

TESSA (*direct address*). The fire started at four thirty in the afternoon.

VINCENZA (*direct address*). And spread up from the eighth floor.

YETTA (*direct address*). We were on the ninth floor. No one told us. No one warned us.

LENA (*direct address*). The doors were locked.

ALL. Locked.

YETTA. We were locked in.

TESSA. Like animals on a spit of fire.

VINCENZA. The fire.

YETTA. The fire.

FOREMAN. The fire.

LENA (*direct address*). The workers strike of 1909 resulted in a signed agreement for all the clothing factories in New York for safer working conditions.

FOREMAN (*direct address*). The United States government had no authority over who signed the agreement.

VINCENZA (*direct address*). Every major company signed the agreement out of good faith.

TESSA. Except—

ALL (*direct address*). The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory.

VINCENZA. March.

TESSA. Twenty-fifth.

LENA. 1911.

YETTA. New York.
 FOREMAN. City.
 VINCENZA. In less than thirty minutes—
 FOREMAN. One hundred and forty-six bodies are destroyed.
 VINCENZA. Hundreds more wounded.
 LENA. The largest industrial disaster in the city's history.
 YETTA. And now we live, and die with—
 LENA. The consequences ...
 FOREMAN. Of capitalism.
 YETTA. We left our country with hope.
 FOREMAN. We left our families with the promise of a richer future.
 LENA. Little did we know that our rights were already made up for us.
 TESSA. We left our own country, to a land we thought was different. Secure.
 LENA. But no place is secure.
 VINCENZA. No place is safe.
 YETTA. One day.
 FOREMAN. Perhaps one day. It's not the country's job to protect the people that work for it.
 ALL WOMEN. Isn't it?
 FOREMAN. Sew!
 VINCENZA. So!
 TESSA. So!
 LENA. So!
 YETTA. So.
 FOREMAN. So, now what?
 VINCENZA. Not now.

TESSA. No, not now. For now, there is nothing.
 VINCENZA. Nothing but memories.
 YETTA. Nothing but fear.
 LENA. Nothing but fulfillment.
 YETTA. Nothing ... but bells.
 VINCENZA. I can see the land approaching, faster and faster. Closer and closer. Through the brisk blistering air, my body quivers. I am approaching! Carry me! (*Frantic.*)
 HOLD ME! (*Beat. Calm. Stage whisper.*) Smile for me.
 (*VINCENZA closes her eyes.*)
 LENA. She cannot slow down.
 YETTA. She cannot stop.
 TESSA. Yet before she kisses the earth ... she remembers.
 (*Stage whisper.*) She remembers.
 (*They all look back out to address the audience as VINCENZA's smile fades from her face and she opens her eyes.*)
 VINCENZA (*direct address*). My body is found several feet below the sidewalk.
 TESSA (*direct address*). My body was discovered fused within a heap of molten metal ... one of the two elevators that burned in the fire.
 YETTA. I hold my dear sister—
 LENA. I hold my dear sister.
 YETTA. And I keep holding her.
 LENA. I keep holding her.
 YETTA. So tight.
 LENA & YETTA. And will never let go.
 YETTA. Never.

LENA. Never.

YETTA. We take one last journey together. One last adventure. The undiscovered country.

ELEVATOR OPERATOR. Five times I went up to get people. Five times. But then the fire had burned the cable and we were stuck inside. In life, we build boxed barriers from those around us. So why is it that only through tragedy do we come so close together? Why couldn't I have reached out to those around me? Why did I stay in my box? Why did I hide and fear? We come into the world wet, crying and alone. Some of us leave in exactly the same way. On this day we left ...

ALL. Together.

(They all hold hands.)

ELEVATOR OPERATOR. It is a journey that none of us wants to take. That path that awaits us all has been laid out. *(Looking straight ahead.)* So! *(Beat. No response as the girls all look at him.)* I too must travel.

(TESSA lifts her head.)

TESSA. The fire and smoke are closing my lungs. God's brick and mortar tears have fallen to burn through and bury themselves inside my corpse. My lungs are sanguine soot. And our bodies are carried away on a palatial chariot across the great city of New York. Hand in hand, soul in soul, all of us will cross the heavens, into the temperate climate, married in unison as a single footprint upon this earth. One day, when the sun has risen just for us, we shall climb the steps into that place where there are sounds of laughing, a place of smiles and playfulness. Up ... up ...

(Everyone looks up.)

ALL. Towards home.

(The sound of wind. None of the characters show a face of fear, but rather one of contentment. The lights slowly fade, then in the dark the wind slowly fades.)

End of Play